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Risk Perceptions in International Leisure Travel

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Abstract: In the last five years, the world has experienced unexpected tragic events and natural disasters. However, international tourism is expected to grow continually and tourists are therefore becoming more concerned with safety and security during their international travel. This article provides the extensive review of literature regarding research on risk perceptions in international tourism. Eleven dimensions of perceived risk in international leisure travel were identified in the literature: "Health Risk," "Value Risk," "Psychological Risk," "Social Risk," "Terrorism Risk," "Political Instability Risk," "Equipment Risk," "Financial Risk," "Time Risk," "Satisfaction Risk," and "Communication Risk." Possible research questions are proposed for future studies.

Keywords: perceived risk, travelers, international leisure travel

I Introduction

Travel has been described as an essential phenomenon in modern western society, and modern tourist travel has developed rapidly around the world (Cohen, 1995). Although the new millennium has started with the anticipation of growth in global tourism, the first four years have experienced catastrophic events. People around the world still have a vivid memory of the terrors on September 11, 2001 in New York, Pennsylvania, and Washington D.C.; there were many domestic and foreign travelers who became victims of the tragic events. Tourist arrivals in the U.S. were expected to take more than 5 years to recover to the number of visitors before the terrorist attacks (TIA, 2003). International visitors to the U.S. in 2004 were estimated 10% fewer than in 2000 (CNN, 2005). Additionally, international travel in the Asia-Pacific region during the first half of 2003 was devastated by Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome and the Iraqi War. Although international tourism showed a positive rebound in 2004 from 2003, the year of 2004 ended with the tragic seaquake and following tsunami in many South Asian countries (WTO, 1995). While there are reports that give a positive outlook on recovery of tourism in these regions (*Assessing the Economic Damage of the South Asia Megatsunami, 2005*), these events have negatively affected individuals' perceived risk in international travel.

Tourism providers should know that perceived risk caused by an event might become a large source of stress to travelers. There also exists a strongly influential "generalization effect" of perceived risk which can result in serious economic losses. While the construct of perceived risk has been widely employed in the

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study of consumer behavior in marketing research, research on perceived risk related to international tourism has been neglected (Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Verhage, Yavas, & Green, 1990; Yavas, 1987).

II Literature Review

Since the concept of risk was introduced in economics in the 1920s (Knight, 1948), it has been successfully used in theories of decision making in economics, finance, and the decision sciences (Dowling & Staelin, 1994). For the analysis of decision making under risk, Expected Utility Theory (Von Neumann & Morgenstern, 1947) had been accepted as a normative model of rational choice (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) until Prospect Theory (Kahneman & Tversky, 1979) was proposed as an alternative to the expected theory; then Fishburn (1982) provided a new theory called Skew-Symmetric Bilinear (SSB) Utility Theory. Expected Utility Theory established a set of axioms that were the basis for evaluating alternative decisions, and those axioms have been reduced to three basic axioms by a number of researchers: transitivity, independence, and continuity of preferences (Bell & Farquhar, 1986). Prospect Theory allows predictions of behavior that violates the axioms of Expected Utility Theory (Currim & Sarin, 1989). SSB Utility Theory uses axioms "that are simultaneously weak enough to accommodate observed behavior and strong enough to have normative appeal" (Bell & Farquhar, 1986).

In marketing research, Bauer (1960) first proposed looking at consumer behavior as an instance of risk taking because "consumer behavior involves risk in the sense that any action of a consumer will produce consequences which he cannot anticipate with anything approximating certainty, and some of which at least are likely to be unpleasant" (p. 390). He also noted that "individuals can respond to and deal with risk only as he perceives it subjectively," and only "perceived risk" influences consumers' decisions (p. 395). In the Merriam-Webster Dictionary, "Risk" is defined as "possibility of loss or injury." Knight's definition of "risk" is having a known probability associated with various decision outcomes while "uncertainty" exists when knowledge of a precise probability is lacking. Bauer's argument of "perceived risk" and Knight's definition of "risk" indicate the same concept which excludes an unknown probability of "risk." Cox (1967) also commented that consumers are rarely in a position to know the probabilities associated with purchases exactly. However, marketers have used the two concepts interchangeably (Mitchell, 1994).

Since Bauer's seminal discourse, many studies in consumer behavior empirically tested the construct of perceived risk (Brooker, 1984; Jacoby & Kaplan, 1972; Kaplan, Szybillo, & Jacoby, 1974; Laroche, McDougall, Bergeron, & Yang, 2004; Mitchell & Greatorex, 1990; Peter & Ryan, 1976; Roselius, 1971; Stone & Gronhaug, 1993; Verhage *et al.*, 1990) because perceived risk is more powerful at explaining consumer behavior (Mitchell, 1994). Jacoby and Kaplan (1972) first operationalized the construct of perceived risk associated with 12 different consumer products such as televisions, suits, toothpaste, and vitamins, and identified five risk dimensions: psychological, financial, performance, physical, and social risk. They found that performance risk had the highest correlation with overall perceived risk followed by financial risk in tangible products. These results were cross-validated in a later study that used the same risk dimensions and the same 12 products with a new data set (Kaplan *et al.*, 1974). The later study also found that performance risk was the most predictive of overall perceived risk for most products. Another study examined four kinds of loss (time loss, hazard loss, ego loss, and money loss) related to risk and identified brand loyalty and major brand image as the most favorable risk relievers (Roselius, 1971). The relationship between perceived risk and brand loyalty was examined in a situation of buying a car (Peter & Ryan, 1976). The researchers found that perceived risk is a predictor of brand preference only for consumers who considered it as important. They also suggested that "probability of loss is a handled risk phenomenon and importance of loss is an inherent risk phenomenon" (p. 187). Brooker (1984) examined six types of perceived risk adopted from the two previous studies (Jacoby &

Kaplan, 1972; Roselius, 1971). The results of his study revealed that the strongest risk dimensions related to grocery shopping were financial risk and performance risk; physical risk and social risk were the two least related dimensions. Stone and Gronhaug (1993) developed multiple indicators measuring six risk dimensions that were identified in previous studies (Jacoby & Kaplan, 1972; Roselius, 1971). Their study revealed that financial and psychological risk were the most important dimensions influencing overall risk perception in buying a personal computer.

Verhage *et al.* (1990) examined the presence of perceived risk in four countries (The Netherlands, Saudi Arabia, Thailand, and Turkey). While perceived risk related to buying bath soap and toothpaste was observed in all of the four countries, the relationship between perceived risk and brand loyalty was not found. Also, the degree of risk perception varied between countries. Consumers in Turkey perceived a significantly lower level of risk in purchasing bath soap and toothpaste than consumers in other countries. This study suggested that the concept of perceived risk is cross-nationally valid but the risk reduction strategies should be developed for each individual country. The difference of perceived risk between national and non-national consumers in the U.S. was examined (Mitchell & Greatorex, 1990). Non-nationals had an increased risk perception, and psychological loss was found to be the most different between national and non-national consumers. This study showed that brand loyalty was the most useful risk reliever and this result is in contrast to the results of the study by Verhage *et al.*, which is introduced above (1990).

Laroche *et al.* (2004) investigated the impact of intangibility on perceived risk using six generic products selected to represent various degrees of intangibility: jeans and computers (highly tangible goods), music CDs (less tangible goods), pizzeria dinners (tangible services), and checking accounts and internet browsers (intangible services). Among the three dimensions of intangibility (physical intangibility, mental intangibility, and generality), physical intangibility was strongly related to risk dimensions with goods, and mental intangibility was significantly related to risk dimensions of services. This result suggests that the impact of intangibility on perceived risk is different between goods and services.

Risk is viewed as an aspect of involvement that directly affects an information search just as three other dimensions: importance, hedonic (pleasure), and sign value (Gursoy, 2001), and a recent study by Gursoy and Gavcar (2003) found that international tourists' involvement is a three dimensional construct: pleasure/interest, risk probability, and risk importance. However, Chaudhuri (2000) tested four different models for the role of risk in information search: (1) risk as involvement; (2) risk as an antecedent; (3) risk as consequences; and (4) risk as moderator. His study results revealed that risk is divided into two factors, functional and emotional risk; hedonic involvement is directly related to information search; functional risk mediates the importance dimension of involvement and search; and emotional risk is related to the hedonic dimension but does not mediate hedonic involvement and search. These mixed results of involvement and search models need further investigation.

In tourism research, Moutinho (2000) provides a comprehensive analysis of perceived risk associated with travel behavior. His definition of perceived risk is "a function of uncertainty and consequence," which is more general than other definitions discussed above. He also listed four aspects of perceived risk: (1) uncertainty inherent in the product; (2) uncertainty in place and mode of purchase; (3) degree of financial and psycho-social consequences; and (4) the subjective uncertainty experienced by the tourist. To understand tourist risk perception involved in purchase decisions, the relationship between risk variables should be examined (Moutinho, 2000). Figure 1 describes the relationships of variables; those variables are the tourist's past behavior; the tourist's learning process toward travel-related concepts; the tourist's intra-personal characteristics; the type of sources used before and after purchase decisions; the tourist's level of risk awareness; and the tourist's evaluation of the product attributes.

One area of tourism research which involves risk is

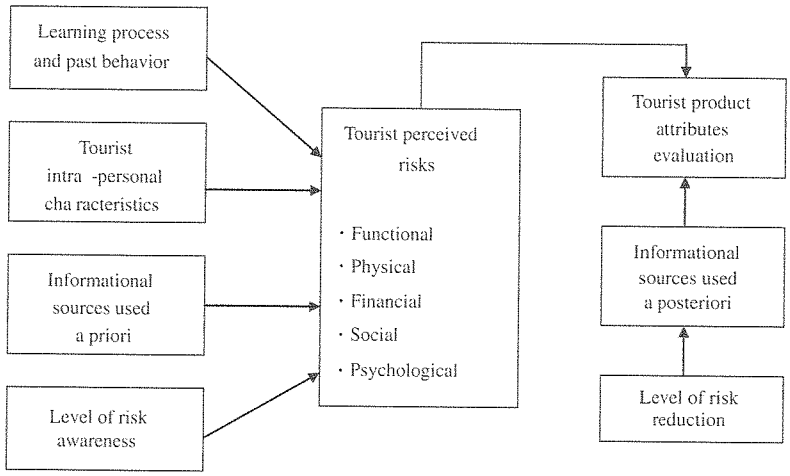

Figure 1　The Relationship of Tourist Risk Variables (Moutinho, 2000)

destination image (Baloglu, 1996, , 2001; Beerli & Martin, 2004) but these studies include one single indicator of "personal safety" among the cognitive components of image. Many studies investigated perceived risk and its components related to leisure activities and international travel, and its relationship to travel decisions (Cheron & Ritchie, 1982; Lepp & Gibson, 2003; Martinez, 2000; Mitchell & Vassos, 1997; 1988; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992; Sonmez, 1994; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998a, , 1998b; Yavas, 1987, , 1990). Cheron and Ritchie (1982) revealed that there exist distinctive differences between the nature of perceived risk related to tangible goods and leisure activities. The psychological dimension of perceived risk was mostly related to overall perceived risk of leisure activities, while performance risk was the most important predictor for tangible products (Jacoby & Kaplan, 1972). Yavas (1987) first examined the relationship of perceived risk to international travel decision making. He presented four reasons that risk perception may be the primary influence in international travel decision making: (1) the inability to infer expected benefits from a trip can result in anxiety; (2) international travel decision making accompanies a high involvement situation; (3) perceived risk has a particularly major impact on first-time international travelers; and (4) cultural differences may cause a higher level of perceived risk. Yavas (1990) compared two groups of Saudis ? one group who visited Germany for a vacation and one group who did not ? regarding demographic profile, travel patterns to other countries, travel motives, information search behavior and risk perception. In his study, five types of risk in foreign travel were included: ego, money, time, health, and social risks. Although he failed to provide a description of measuring items and an explanation of the reliability of the measures, the results showed that health risk appeared to be the primary concern followed by time risk.

The seven dimensions of types of risk were employed to investigate risk perceptions associated with pleasure travel (Roehl, 1988; Roehl & Fesenmaier, 1992). Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) identified three risk groups that differed in terms of the most recent trip taken and the benefits sought from travel: a Risk Neutral group, a Functional Risk group, and a Place Risk group. They employed seven perceived risk components that are used as independent variables. These include: physical risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will result in physical danger, injury or sickness; financial risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will not provide value for the money spent; social risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will affect others' opinion of the individual; time risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will take too much time or be a waste of time; equipment risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination

will result in mechanical or equipment problems; satisfaction risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will not provide personal satisfaction; and psychological risk, the possibility that a trip to this destination will not reflect an individual's personality or self-image. These dimensions are discussed in a later section, "dimensions of perceived risk."

Mitchell & Vassos (1997) examined the differences of perceived risk and risk reduction in package holiday purchasing between British and Cypriot undergraduate students; the highest risk factor was "your hotel will not be as nice as it appears in the brochure picture," and the two most useful risk-reducing strategies selected were "reading independent travel reviews" and "purchasing some kind of travel insurance." Sonmez and Graefe (1998a) identified that perceptions of risk and feelings of safety during travel have a strong influence on the avoidance of particular regions. They also found that relationships between risk perceptions and travel behavior are situation-specific, which suggest that generalizing the buying behavior of goods to travel decisions may not be appropriate. Martinez (2000) examined the U.S. tourist's subjective assignment to perceptions of risk of criminal victimization on the U.S. side of the U.S.-Mexico Border using the Expected Value Model to examine the consumer's perception of risk; the results showed that U.S. tourists' subjective assessment of the probability of criminal victimization did not equal the objective measure of risk at the border. Most recently, Lepp and Gibson (2003) investigated the relationship between tourists' preference for novelty or familiarity and their perception of risk associated with international tourism.

The following discussion will more fully describe the dimensions of risk identified in tourism research.

1) Dimensions of Perceived Risk

Many studies adopted five dimensions identified in the study by Jacoby and Kaplan (1972): "Financial Risk," "Performance Risk," "Physical Risk," "Social Risk," and "Psychological Risk" (Cheron & Ritchie, 1982; Mitra, Reiss, & Capella, 1999; Stone & Gronhaug, 1993; Stone & Mason, 1995). "Time Risk" was added by Roselius (1971). These six dimensions were investigated together in other studies (Stone & Gronhaug, 1993; Stone & Mason, 1995), but one of the dimensions (physical risk) was excluded in some studies (Laroche *et al.*, 2004). "Satisfaction Risk" first appeared in the study regarding perceived risk and leisure activities (Cheron & Ritchie, 1982). Some studies focused on a particular dimension, such as "Political Instability Risk" (McCleary & Whitney, 1994; Seddighi, Nuttall, & Theocharous, 2001; Sonmez & Graefe, 1998b), and "Terrorism Risk" (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998a, , 1998b).

In addition to the seven perceived risk types in the study of Roehl & Fesenmaier (1992), Sonmez and Graefe (1998b) added three other types of risk: "Health Risk," the possibility of becoming sick while traveling to or at the destination; "Political Instability Risk," the possibility of becoming involved in the political turmoil of the country being visited; and "Terrorism Risk," the possibility of being involved in a terrorist act.

Four attributes of risk were found to be significant among high-risk Saudi perceivers: (1) being an Arab country; (2) good food; (3) value for money; and (4) ease in renting a flat (Yavas, 1987). Although his study did not use the risk dimensions used in other studies, the result suggests that risk dimensions vary depending on nationality.

While most studies discussed above employed a single measure for each dimension, several studies used multiple scales in measuring perceived risk dimensions (Havlena & Desarbo, 1991; Laroche *et al.*, 2004; Stone & Gronhaug, 1993; Stone & Mason, 1995). Havlena and DeSarbo (1991) adopted six dimensions identified from previous studies (performance, financial, safety, social, psychological, and time/opportunity) but developed thirteen risk attributes specifically associated with a car purchase. Stone and Mason (1995) and Stone and Gronhaug (1993) used three items each to measure the six dimensions of risk (social, time, financial, physical, performance, psychological) related to buying a personal computer. Laroche *et al.* (2004) adopted the scales from Stone

and Gronhaug (1993), but one item of "Social Risk" was excluded in their study. The next section presents further discussions of each risk dimension.

Physical Risk

"Physical Risk" was the least related dimension of perceived risk regarding grocery shopping along with "Social Risk" (Brooker, 1984). However, Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) found that "Physical Risk" regarding a general vacation and a specific vacation was the strongest dimension of risk perception in international vacations along with "Equipment Risk." They defined "Physical Risk" as "the possibility that the trip to a particular destination will result in physical danger, injury, or sickness" (p. 18). Another study defined "Physical Risk" related to a group package tour as "the possibility that an individual's health is likely to be exposed to risk, injury, and sickness because of conditions like law and order, weather, and hygiene problems found during the tour" (Tsaur, Tzeng, & Wang, 1997).

Health Risk

Richter (2003) reported that organizations associated with tourists' health, such as the World Health Organization (WHO) and the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), were not successful in performing their original mission of reporting and preventing new or serious diseases. However, more and more of the world's populations are aware of the seriousness of health issues that they may face when they travel abroad. Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome (SARS) devastated international travel in the Asia-Pacific region during the first half of 2003. West Nile Fever in New York and Mad Cow Disease in Europe also impacted travel flows significantly (Richter, 2003). "Health Risk" was found as the most concern for Saudis who both had and did not have experience of visiting Germany (Yavas, 1990).

Financial Risk

While price was not a major determinant of demand in many other service industries, it was a major demand factor in tourism (Schmoll, 1977). Among U.K. international travelers, both package and non-package tourists reported that value for vacation money was equally important to them (Hsieh, O'Leary, & Morrison, 1994). While package travelers agreed to pay more for extras and luxuries, inexpensive travel to a country was more important to non-package travelers; however, both groups showed consent to the statement that "money spent on travel is well spent" (Hsieh *et al.*, 1994).

Social Risk

Reimer (1990) argued that the style of holiday may impress a traveler's peers. The style of holiday includes the number of places visited, the frequency of trips taken, the distance traveled, and the destination's exotic character. Toronto tour operators in Canada reported that peer pressure is a strong motivation for people to buy upscale adventure trips; traveling to sun destinations in the winter season can be a symbol of success (Reimer, 1990). The social risk was the only significant predictor of the intention to travel to Europe among ten risk types in the analysis with a sample of U.S. residents; individuals who have a higher level of social risk were less likely to intend to visit Europe (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998a).

Contrary to findings on the significant role of "Social Risk" presented above, Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) found that "Social Risk" has the lowest correlation with the other six types of risk, and therefore excluded social risk in their further analysis. They defined "Social Risk" as "the possibility that a trip to a particular destination will affect others' opinion of me" (p. 18).

Time Risk

Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) defined "Time Risk" as "the possibility that the trip to a particular destination will take too much time or be a waste of time" (p. 18). "Time Risk" related to services (hotel, fast food, hairdresser, and restaurant meal) was perceived to be more important than that of foods, convenience durables, and shopping goods (Mitchell & Greatorex,

1990).

Equipment Risk

Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) defined "Equipment Risk" as "the possibility of mechanical, equipment or organizational problems while on vacation" (p. 18). Their study results showed that respondents rated equipment risk as the highest perceived risk factor among seven risk types in general vacations as well as in the most recently visited destination. Similar to the results of their study, a sample of British and Cypriot undergraduate students identified an equipment risk related statement as the most important among 42 risk statements in buying a package holiday to Corfu in Greece (Mitchell & Vassos, 1997). The statement is "your hotel may not be as nice as it appears in the brochure pictures" (p. 56).

Tsaur, Tzeng, and Wang provided a definition of equipment risk in their study of tourists' perceived risks during package tours by Taiwanese (Tsaur *et al.*, 1997). The definition is "the dangers arising from the unavailability of equipment or its malfunctioning, such as insufficient telecommunication facilities, unsafe transportation, and break-down of vehicles" (p. 799).

Another example of equipment risk is summarized by the following CNN account: an Egyptian charter plane crashed into the Red Sea on January 3, 2004 (CNN, 2004). The cause of the crash was entirely technical. This accident will cause people to avoid flights and traveling to the area of the accident.

Satisfaction Risk

Cheron and Ritchie (1982) added "Satisfaction Risk" as a new dimension of perceived risk based on their finding from exploratory interviews that individuals were "concerned with the ability of leisure activities to provide a sense of accomplishment and personal satisfaction" (p. 141). They examined the level of perceived risk associated with 20 different leisure activities but travel was not included. Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) defined "Satisfaction Risk" as "the possibility that the trip to a particular destination will not provide personal satisfaction" (p. 18). Sonmez and Graefe (1998b) found that individuals who were more likely to avoid traveling to Africa perceived a higher level of "Satisfaction Risk."

Psychological Risk

Roehl and Fesenmaier (1992) defined "Psychological Risk" as "the possibility that the trip to a particular destination will not reflect an individual's personality or self-image" (p. 18). A study compared the risk perception between national and non-national consumers in the U.K. regarding purchasing four different types of products (foods, non-food convenience, shopping goods, and services) (Mitchell & Greatorex, 1990). Among four types of perceived risk, psychological loss was significantly more important for non-national consumers across all four product categories investigated.

Political Instability Risk

Hall and O'Sullivan (1996) defined "Political Instability" as "a situation in which conditions and mechanisms of governance and rule are challenged as to their political legitimacy by elements operating from outside of the normal operations of the political system" (p. 106). Political instability has a severe impact on international tourism; individuals who perceived a higher degree of "Political Instability Risk" in international travel were significantly more likely to avoid traveling to Asia and South America (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998b).

Terrorism Risk

Sonmez and Graefe (1998b) examined three vacation decisions involving terrorism risk: a lower level of perceived risk of terrorism is associated with the propensity for international tourism; individuals' perceived risk of terrorism increased their extent of information collection; and respondents' terrorism risk perception increased their concern for safety in the destination evaluation. They also found that individuals who perceived a higher level of "Terrorism Risk" were more likely to avoid traveling to the Middle East and Africa. Since the terrorists' attack on September 11,

2001 in the U.S., "Terrorism Risk" has become one significant dimension

Communication Risk

Although a few previous studies (Basala & Klenosky, 2001; Hsieh *et al.*, 1994; Yavas, 1987) recognized that language is an influential factor in destination choices, language barrier has not been investigated as a dimension of travelers' perceived risk which may be due to the lack of cross-cultural studies within tourism research. The native language of the country visited was an important issue for non-package U.K. travelers in their international travel (Hsieh *et al.*, 1994). Their responses were significantly higher than package travelers' responses regarding their agreement on the statement, "important that people speak my language." Basala and Klenosky (2001) examined language as a factor that influences tourists' choice of prospective destinations, because tourists' fluency, or lack of fluency, in the language at a destination can be a barrier in international travel. As they pointed out, the impact of language is one of the least studied factors in tourism research and also an important area that should be explored. In their study, it was clear that tourists tend to visit destinations where there is no language difference regardless of their psychographic characteristics (e.g. novelty-seekers, familiarity-seekers). Yavas (1987) suggested that putting signs in Arabic and recruiting Arabic-speaking personnel in Turkey would be helpful to show a concern for Saudi tourists. Although a few prior studies identified the language barrier as a factor influences travelers' destination choice, it has not been examined as a dimension of perceived risk. Based on these findings on language barrier in international travel, "Communication Risk" needs to be tested empirically in future studies as a dimension of risk perception in vacationing at international destinations.

III Research Questions

From the review of previous studies, the following research questions are suggested for future studies:

1. What are the underlying dimensions of perceived risk in international leisure travel?
2. Are the underlying dimensions of perceived risk of international leisure travelers different depending on destinations?
3. Are the underlying dimensions of perceived risk towards international destinations different depending on nationality (or native language) of travelers?
4. What are the factors influencing perceived risk in international leisure travel?

Ten dimensions of perceived risk were identified and a new dimension of "Communication Risk" was suggested for empirical analysis in tourism literature. However, those dimensions were collected from many separate studies; each study examined different number of dimensions and different types of dimensions. It is necessary to investigate the eleven dimensions of perceived risk in one single analysis and test the utility of each dimension.

Given that relationships between risk perception and travel behavior are situation-specific (Sonmez & Graefe, 1998a), the underlying dimensions of perceived risk may vary depending on destinations or travelers' native language (nationality). Also there are many factors influencing and are influenced by risk perceptions and exploring the relationships between them can expand the understanding of risk perceptions in international tourism.

IV Conclusion

The extensive review of literature regarding research on risk perceptions in international tourism is provided. Ten dimensions of perceived risk in international leisure travel were identified in the literature: "Health Risk," "Value Risk," "Psychological Risk," "Social Risk," "Terrorism Risk," "Political Instability Risk," "Equipment Risk," "Financial Risk," "Time Risk," and "Satisfaction Risk." Also "Communication Risk" is proposed to be tested empirically as a new dimension of perceived risk in international leisure travel. Finally, the four research questions are suggested for future studies.

It is critical for destination marketers to know the

level of risk perception that individuals have when they consider vacationing at a particular destination. This knowledge provides key information of potential visitors' perception towards the destination and of areas that need improvement in promoting the destination. Also future studies which investigate the proposed research questions in this article will expand the understanding of perceived risk related to travelers with different backgrounds.

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